

James Monroe: Life before the Presidency

Taken From the Miller Center at the University of Virginia

Life Before the Presidency

Born on April 28, 1758, in Westmoreland County, Virginia, James Monroe enjoyed all the advantages accruing to the son of a prosperous planter. His father, Spence Monroe, traced his ancestry back to relative who had fought at the side of Charles I in the English civil wars before being captured and exiled to Virginia in 1649. His mother, Elizabeth Jones Monroe, was of Welsh heritage but little is known about her. Beginning at the age of 11, Monroe attended a school run by Reverend Archibald Campbell. His time at this school overlapped with that of John Marshall, who later became the chief justice of the United States.

Eager Patriot

Monroe's parents died when he was in his mid-teens, his father having passed away in 1774 and his mother likely doing so some time earlier (though her actual date of death is unknown). James and his siblings shared an inheritance of land and some slaves, and he and his two brothers—his sister had already married—became wards of their uncle, Joseph Jones. Jones became a mentor and friend to James, often offering him advice and support.

In 1774, Monroe entered the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. His education took place not only in the classroom but also throughout the town, which was the capital of colonial Virginia. It was an exciting time to be in Williamsburg. Royal Governor Dunmore had fled the capital, fearing that the colonists were a danger to him and his family; after he left, Monroe and some of his fellow classmates helped loot the arsenal at the Governor's Palace. They escaped with 200 muskets and 300 swords, which they donated to the Virginia militia. By the winter of 1776, in the wake of Lexington and Concord, Monroe had joined the Virginia infantry. He became an officer in the Continental Army and joined General George Washington's army in New York.

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During the Revolution, Monroe fought with distinction in several important battles, including Trenton, Monmouth, Brandywine, and Germantown. He was severely hurt at the Battle of Trenton, suffering a near fatal wound to his shoulder as he led a charge against enemy cannon. After recuperating, he became a staff officer for General William Alexander. By the end of his service with the Continental Army, he had gained the rank of major; however, because of an excess of officers, he had little possibility of commanding soldiers in the field. He thus resigned his commission in the Continental Army in 1779 and was appointed colonel in the Virginia service. In 1780, Governor Thomas Jefferson sent Monroe to North Carolina to report on the advance of the British.

Quick Jump into Politics

After the war, Monroe studied law, taking Thomas Jefferson as his mentor. He was elected to the Virginia Assembly in 1782 and then served on the Council of State, which advised the governor. Elected to the Continental Congress in 1783, Monroe worked for expanding the power of Congress, organizing government for the western country, and protecting American navigation on the Mississippi River.

While in New York as a member of the Continental Congress, Monroe met Elizabeth Kortright, the daughter of Lawrence Kortright, a prominent local merchant who had lost much of his wealth during the Revolution. She was sixteen at the time, and Monroe was twenty-six; they married the following year, on February 16, 1786. Having passed the Virginia bar in 1782, Monroe and his new bride moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he practiced law.

Among the leading political figures in Virginia, Monroe exhibited an independent streak when he voted against ratifying the U.S. Constitution as a delegate to the state's ratification convention. He wanted a Constitution that allowed for the direct election of senators as well as the President, and the inclusion of a strong bill of rights. After the ratification of the new Constitution, Monroe unsuccessfully challenged James Madison for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Monroe lost by 300 votes, yet the state legislature appointed him to the U.S. Senate in 1790. He thereafter joined with Madison and Jefferson, with whom he had become friendly in the mid-1780s, to oppose the Federalist policies championed by Vice President John

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Adams and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. The three Virginians would remain lifelong friends and allies.

Minister to France and Britain

In 1794, President George Washington sent Monroe to Paris as U.S. minister to France. It was an eventful appointment that lasted two years. When Thomas Paine, the British pamphleteer and supporter of the American Revolution, was imprisoned for having spoken against the execution of King Louis XVI, Monroe won his release and allowed Paine to live for a time with his family at the American minister's residence in Paris.

Monroe's tenure in France was far from easy. Revolutionary France was an unstable place and the new minister had to tread carefully. His mission was to uphold President Washington's policy of strict neutrality toward Britain and France while still assuring the French that America was not favoring Britain. This task became harder when France learned that the United States had signed a new accord—the Jay Treaty—with Great Britain. When France asked Monroe to spell out its details, the President found himself unable to comply: Jay had refused to send him a copy of the document. Although Monroe told the French that the treaty did not alter their agreements, the French were convinced that the United States now favored Britain. In the end, U.S. domestic politics doomed Monroe's tenure in Paris. The Federalists blamed Monroe for deteriorating relations with France, and Washington recalled him.

Out of power momentarily, Monroe returned to Virginia to practice law and attend to his plantations. He was elected governor in 1799 and worked vigorously in support of public education and the election of Thomas Jefferson as President in 1800. In 1803, the victorious Jefferson sent Monroe to France as a special envoy to help negotiate the Louisiana Purchase. Monroe then served as the U.S. minister to Britain from 1803 to 1807 with a brief stint as a special envoy to Spain in 1805. In Spain, Monroe tried to negotiate a treaty to cede the Spanish territory along the Gulf of Mexico to the United States. However, he soon realized that Spain had no intention of signing such a treaty and so returned to Britain.

During his tenure in Britain, he tried to negotiate an end to impressments—the British practice of seizing U.S. sailors and forcing them to serve in the British Navy. Although Monroe

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signed a treaty with Britain in 1806 resolving some outstanding issues, the treaty did not include a ban on impressments, and President Jefferson did not even submit the treaty to the U.S. Senate for consideration. Monroe was upset that Jefferson and Secretary of State James Madison did not see the treaty as he did—as a first step toward better relations with Britain. But Jefferson and Madison knew that current political attitudes would never support a treaty without a ban on impressments. Although this episode caused a brief rift between the three friends, Monroe recognized that the President had to take domestic politics into account when considering his foreign policy options.

Following his return home in 1808, Monroe was tapped by dissident Republicans to oppose Madison for the Democratic-Republican presidential nomination. Although Monroe allowed himself to be nominated, he never considered his challenge to Madison seriously and stressed that he differed with Madison only with respect to foreign affairs; in all other areas, the two saw eye-to-eye. Madison easily won the 1808 presidential election. Three years later, in January 1811, Monroe was once again elected governor of Virginia, though he did not serve for long; that April, Madison named him secretary of state.

Secretary of State and Secretary of War

As the nation's chief diplomat, Monroe focused on relations with Britain and France. The two European countries were at war with one another and their fighting infringed upon U.S. shipping and trade. The United States wanted France and Britain to respect American commercial interests as befitted those of a neutral country. Although both nations targeted American trade, the Madison administration concentrated primarily on Britain because of its frequent practice of seizing U.S. sailors and forcing them to serve in the British navy.

The United States declared war on Britain in June 1812, but the war was far from popular. Many New Englanders found that it disrupted their access to European markets. Additional numbers thought that neutrality rights were not a sufficient reason to go to war. However, Madison and Monroe both believed that the United States needed to resist British depredations by force of arms.

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From the beginning, the war was a disaster for the United States. The army was unequipped and unprepared, and the initial military actions resulted in defeat. When Madison's secretary of war resigned, Monroe took over the office on a temporary basis, from December 1812 to February 1813; he would do so again from August 1814 until March 1815. Monroe was well suited to the demands of the post because of his understanding of the military and his strong organizational skills. He helped reorganize the army and brought new energy to the war effort.

In August 1814, when British troops appeared at the mouth of the Potomac River, Monroe led a scouting party to report on their advance. He sent word to Madison warning that the British were marching toward Washington, D.C. As British troops headed toward the capital, Monroe stayed in the city to help with its evacuation. After the British attacked Washington and burned most of the government buildings, Monroe returned to the city. Madison then placed him in charge of its defenses.

Monroe's popularity rose after the war, due to his tireless service in Madison's cabinet. A new generation of war veterans would remember his leadership with fondness and respect, leaving him well-positioned to receive the Democratic-Republican nomination for President in the 1816 election.

Reading Questions

- 1) How old was Monroe when his parents passed away? _____
- 2) When the Royal Governor of Virginia fled the capital, what did Monroe and his college classmates do? _____
- 3) During the winter of 1776, during the wake of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, what did James Monroe do? _____
- 4) What happened to Monroe at the Battle of Trenton? _____
- 5) When studying law, who was James Monroe's mentor? _____

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- 6) Did Monroe support the ratification of the constitution? _____ Why? _____

- 7) How was Monroe able to use his position as foreign ambassador to France to help Thomas Paine? _____
- 8) As President, Thomas Jefferson sent Monroe to France as a special envoy to help negotiate what? _____
- 9) During his time as an ambassador to England, Monroe tried to negotiate a treaty between the U.S. and England that would end what? _____
- 10) James Madison and James Monroe only disagreed on one issue. What was it? _____

- 11) When Madison's Secretary of War resigned in the middle of the War of 1812, what did Monroe do? _____